II

RICE AND ITS GRADUATES [1]

IF you are not now college educated it is difficult to explain your presence here, for graduation from Rice is the result of no accident or happy oversight on the part of the authorities, but of serious tasks, faithfully performed. It is hard to get in here, harder to stay in, and hardest to get out with an academic degree. Rice is completing only the thirteenth year of its active existence, but it is already distinguished among the schools and colleges of America, and when your children are ready for graduation it will be known universally as a place where a diploma signifies an education. You are being graduated from a college over whose portals is written in invisible letters: "No loafers allowed; they who are seeking lotus land should pass on".

Where do you stand now? Not at life's commencement. By tradition based on a history which we need not trace, this is called "Commencement Day". Because of the name, because of your relative youth and the crisis which this day marks in your lives, commencement speakers sometimes address graduating classes as if they were on the threshold of life. This is a figment and treats florally what is immensely significant. You have already been engaged with life for approximately a fifth of a century, and you have passed through some of the physiological and psychological

[1] Address delivered by Stockton Axson, Professor of English Literature at the Rice Institute, at the tenth commencement convocation of the Rice Institute, held Monday morning, June 8, 1925, at nine o'clock.

experiences which will almost assuredly determine your future thought and behavior. You are adults, not children. I reflect the thought of a very great man on a similar occasion when I remind you that for many of you life is already a third spent, for some it is half over, for others—I will not pursue a thought which might be depressing, but were it not folly to address as mere thoughtless youths those who have already entered deeply into that tangled maze which mortals call life? For what remains we wish you good luck. May you find life as a whole satisfactory, useful, and happy. If it is useful, it will be happy.

I cannot tell you what you have derived from college. Only a few of you can tell yourselves today what college has brought you. But as with staff and wallet you make the next leg of the journey, and then the next and the next, until earth's adventure ends, you will find the meaning of your formal education growing yearly more clear to you.

The class seems to fall into three general divisions: First, those who will immediately apply what they have learned to some technical occupation or to teaching. Second, those who will continue their studies in postgraduate and professional schools, who will become masters and doctors of science, or lawyers or clergymen or physicians, or expert engineers. Three to five years of postgraduate study superimposed upon college and that upon high school seems a long road to a profession. Your parents made the journey more quickly, but the prolongation has been planned and designated by the pundits of the profession and they ought to know. Besides, there is something else: nothing is worth anything except joy be derived from doing it well. He who lags in the rear because of imperfect equipment strays into the by-path of the inferiority complex, which leads to the road to ruin. A pause, an interpolation,

a reminder of the most triumphant life that has been lived on earth, the most significant, the most transforming. It consisted of thirty years of preparation and three years of fulfillment. We do not know much about what Christ was doing in the thirty years, but all the world is aflame with the knowledge and inspiration of what he did in the three years. And no word of regret is recorded for the long time he spent in preparing for the brief public service.

In the third division of the class are those who will go directly into some business enterprise. For these there is a comparatively new and remarkable fact, that great business concerns are seeking more and more the college graduate, not for his technical training but for his general education. Some large corporations will accept no applicants unless they are college graduates; others, less stringent, send scouts to the universities to explore the senior classes for likely timber. It used to be difficult to give a satisfactory answer to the hard-headed, practical questioner demanding the "use" of a general college education. Now the answer can be as practical, direct, *and* material as the question: "It helps one to get a job".

Why is this change? One only guesses at clues to the answer. First—"Psychology" is an eminent factor in modern business, and the college graduate is presumed to know something of psychology. Second—It is possible that business directors discern in college graduates more supple minds, more highly trained potentialities to thread the complexities and intricacies of modern business. Each generation has always differed from the foregoing and the difference became more marked in the industrial era, a fact illuminated by Arnold Bennett's pre-war "Milestones". But the difference since the great war has been cyclonic, and calls for minds adaptable to incredibly swift changes,

capable of creating a new procedure today and changing it tomorrow. Of course, this does not and never will dispense with those valiant souls whom we call "self-made". No college training, conservative or progressive, can supply the place of natural genius, character, audacity and industry. Our country at large, including our Texas, was chiefly developed by self-made men under the leadership of self-educated men. Witness such typical and commanding figures as Franklin, Washington, Lincoln and Edison. But the sporting chance is with the college-bred whose mental tests are likely to run a fair average.

It is a new age in business and a new age in education. Education is more practical than of yore—another recommendation of it to the business man. Education is less metaphysical, not necessarily less philosophical, for in colleges like Rice it is the aim to base sound practice on underlying principles. Rice seeks not to train its students in a rote of answers to a series of questions, but seeks to help them to find themselves and their places in the scheme of things.—"To find themselves!"—A wag once remarked that it is absurd for one to say he has lost himself, for that is the only thing he hasn't lost. Perhaps it were more accurate to say that finding oneself and finding his true position in a forest are simultaneous phenomena. So soon as the man is oriented and knows again how trails lead, he recovers the sense of identity which was rapidly slipping from him.

"Blessed is he who has found his work. Let him ask no other blessedness," says Carlyle. Oneself; one's place; one's work—they are very nearly identities. If you have found them you have found something better than the fountain of youth; you have found the secret of great living.

Your elders, my contemporaries, lost their way in a

forest, which like that in Barrie's play, sprang up overnight. What began in war terminated in revolution. The measure of the change which has overtaken us is not in the ruined areas of France, Belgium and Italy, but in a new way of thinking which we of the older generation find it difficult to master. Hats off to the men and women of the older generation who are seeking by hook or crook to simplify the complexities of current life; but events outrun their thoughts, and the new wine is bursting the old bottles. Some of the counsels offered are too simple; on the one hand, a theoretical communism which put into practice would disestablish the last remains of organized government. On the other hand, many are seeking for solution of our problems by merely going back to old ways, but the calamity which befell us was too gigantic for that simple prescription. Said Dean Inge, "It is no more possible to put the world together again as it was before the war than it is to put the human body together again just the same after an operation".

What a conglomerate is this new world! Scan it from one angle and there seems never in history to have been such abandonment to reckless living, such mad seeking after pleasure, such disregard of law, such willful destruction of the old foundations. On the other hand, not in the memory of any one living, has there been such universal interest in religion, such seeking the light—and such dimming of the light by controversy. There was never so much religion in the world as today, and a world possessed by religion cannot perish. Our troubles are temporary, they will pass, the day will dawn as sure as the world is spared from catastrophic destruction, but in the interim there is necessary much agony, much hard thinking, much brave doing.

Meanwhile, there is the new generation, the Questioners, represented by you in cap and gown, reiterating, insistent, persistent, not to be put off with easy formulas but going to the root of the matter with your inquiry, asking: "In what hiding place lurked that prideful nineteenth century civilization during the events of 1914-1918, and far worse the events which followed those? Maybe it is too soon to expect civilization to end war, but if civilization cannot make peace, what advantage hath it over barbarism?" I do not know, my older friends, how it appears to you, but to me there is something awesome in this new generation, with their originality and their contempt for the orderliness, dignity, purposefulness and fulfillment of our old nineteenth century, and their resolution to build up a new civilization, water-tight and proof against chaos. They are the masters of the near future. They are going to do something vitally different from their parents. Will it be for better or for worse? We need not preach to them our platitudes of the past. They laugh at us, or they are silent. Our great task is to reinterpret for them the past. Do you see that straight-limbed, erect, clear-eyed, sufficient young fellow with the initial of his university woven into his sweater and his monosyllabic conversation in the presence of his elders; or that apparently flippant girl who seems intent only on gathering rosebuds from the passing hour—unless you have talked long and confidentially with them you know little of the depth and range of their thoughts. These are The Deliverers, or The Diabolists, the destroyers or upbuilders of that which is too much for us. These are the people of the twentieth century—already a quarter gone.

A fact unimpressive to them for they never knew any other century, but startling to us of the older generation

to whom it seems only a little while ago that we were looking forward to the twentieth century and discussing the momentously trivial question whether 1900 would be the end of the old century or the beginning of the new. To your generation, members of the graduating class, is committed a task, more complex, more difficult and more glorious than any other generation ever inherited. I know, I am painfully aware, that it all sounds platitudinous, but I should like you to stop and consider how much greater is the burden laid upon you than upon any previous generation.

With all your originality, with all the easefulness with which you think and speak the language of this new era (so hard to us), you must know something of the past, must catch the withering breath of the desolating winds which blow across the waste regions of other overthrown civilizations, as well as the invigorating air of hope and comfort from those great successes of past endeavors which nothing brought to pause save death, the kind friend, to the faithful toiler. President Wilson in the early months of the war, back in 1914, remarked that all precedents seemed to have failed. Even he said that, he, so familiar with political history. It was to seem so to him for only a little while. Presently he began to study the past in a new way, by the light of the torches of war, and from it as well as from his observation of the tortured present, he learned the lessons which he sought to teach the world. I say to you, young men and women, that if you throw all the past overboard, you will build a cubist civilization, bizarre, insecure. I believe in you; I know that it is you that must save us, and your originality and your familiarity with the modes of thought of the present are part of your equipment, but with all of that equipment you cannot without disaster jettison

the past. All that has been learned in all the centuries contains some guiding matter for you, even you. Not to discard the past, but to understand it more deeply is part of your work.

I have not meant to draw a dark sketch. I have merely wanted to impress upon you whose heritage it is to give guidance to the new era, the complexity of your problem, and to suggest that close thinking and sometimes cautious action will be as necessary as bold thinking and daring action. Your opportunity is crimson, not with blood that is shed but with blood that is dancing in your veins, tingling in your hands, flushing your cheeks with ardor for the great enterprise and the new adventure. You are the builders. Soon, very soon, the bravest and boldest of the older generation will have to yield place to your leadership. Is it not right that you should be a little thoughtful in contemplation of all this?

I do not want to fly the kite too high, I have wanted to talk simply, but about important things. But I am not forgetting—and here I am talking especially to the men—that first of all there are some very practical things. Tomorrow some of you will be hunting a job, your object very personal, to earn a living, first for one, then for two, then for several. And there are the women, if anything, more audacious than the men. It was natural that Bernard Shaw, the discerner, should have chosen Joan of Arc for the subject of a recent play, for we are looking to the women to make this a new kind of era. Women instinctively dislike war. Women instinctively love order. You women would not be recognizable by Sir Walter Scott or Tennyson. You are comrades of the men folk, not clinging vines. You know how to fight. You are making a vast impression on the new business and on the new social conditions. Your influence

in politics will be felt more and more. In all of you who are high-minded there is an aspiration, to be in marching line with the comrades of your own generation intent on making the world more habitable.

Rice is favored in equipment and faculty; the equipment new, the faculty for the most part young—born in the nineteenth century but so late therein that they have caught the twentieth century knack of thought. You of the graduating class have been studying with your contemporaries, a little older, a little wiser, much more learned, but your comrades. From the outset Rice has had a remarkable faculty and a most enlightened policy, due to a wise Board of Trustees and a President with far-seeing vision and corresponding practicality. We have had defection from our ranks naturally, but we have also had equal acquisitions. Some have gone, many have come, and some have gone and come back. Dr. Wilson's return to us is not only immensely gratifying, but an extraordinary event and a measure of the devotion of the Rice Institute faculty to the Institution. This great physicist left us to occupy Lord Kelvin's chair in Glasgow, with one possible exception the most notable chair of physics in the English-speaking world, and now he is coming back to his own chair which he himself made illustrious and which if life and health are spared him he will make even more famous.

To maintain this Institution on the high level to which Trustees and President have raised it, it is in my judgment essential that in addition to excellent teachers we shall always need men of world renown. Rice is great, but within limitations; it needs more than it has in building, equipment, and men. Because Rice is new, it has no body of alumni to draw upon for increased funds as have the universities of the East. The revenue of the alumni of wealthy

old Harvard is almost infinite compared with the earning capacity of the graduates of young and small Rice. Back in 1912 this institution was one of the wealthy colleges of the land, thanks to Mr. Rice and the wise investments of the Trustees. I believe that then it ranked seventh in wealth among American institutions of learning. Now it is far down in the line. By bequests, gifts, alumni subscriptions, colleges that were poor compared with Rice in 1912, make us now appear impoverished. We have not shared in the general prosperity of the country as have the older institutions of the North. The budget of Columbia University for next year's expenditures is within two or three millions of Rice's entire wealth, and this does not take into account Columbia's plan for erecting several new buildings with money outside the budget. Must Rice wait for seventy-five or one hundred years until a body of wealthy alumni lay their offering on the altar of their Alma Mater?

I have no license for what I am saying. I may even be rebuked by the authorities for saying it, but the thing is close to my heart and I ask you, people of this so wealthy city, if it does not appeal to your imagination to enlarge and enrich a college which you regard with gratification as one of the distinguishing objects of this distinguished city.

The needs are many. Here are a few: A spacious, comely library building and an endowment fund to furnish it with books and service. It is astonishing how many books we have already collected, but we need adequate and modern housing space for them, and we also need hundreds of thousands of other books for daily use and for the research work of student and professor. In the long run it is the man who sets forward the boundaries of knowledge who confers the greatest distinction upon his college. Secondly, we need a chapel, non-sectarian, dedicated to the living God,

and creating a spiritual bond between students and faculty. In the third place, we need a biological laboratory corresponding to our physical and chemical laboratories than which there are no better in the land. Another need and a crying one is a general academic building with more spacious lecture rooms, far more numerous offices, seminary rooms, consulting rooms where professor and student can meet for personal conference which is the truest form of teaching. Then we need more residential halls, a President's house commensurate with the spaciousness and dignity of the Institute, and an increased endowment fund. Some of these will doubtless be provided out of the present endowment fund, but some we cannot have for many, many decades unless it should enter into the spirit and thought of men and women of Houston to present them to us. A building in the gracious, almost incomparable, architecture of this place and bearing your name will be a greater monument than you can build for yourself in any cemetery, and it seems to me—though I am aware that a poor man cannot think like a rich man—that I should like to build one of these monuments when still I was living so that I could walk around it and admire it and enjoy it without any unpleasant reminders of the stealthy slippered enemy of man who so soon will stop my breath. And greater than all this, you will be assisting in providing for the completeness of education of the future builders of the nation and the state. I earnestly hope for every facility of learning here which the ambitious student can find anywhere, and I hope that students will be stimulated to remain with us after graduation and post-graduation. We are proud of the records which our young men and women have already made in northern colleges, but too many of them are staying in the

North. Texas needs them in its schools, banks, corporations, professions, stores, ranches and farms.

I return to you, friends of the graduating class, for a last brief word. I have not been neglecting you in pleading for the college which you love so dearly, but I want once more to be personal with you. I have insisted in talking to you in very sober terms as mature people upon whom there are already descending responsibilities, complex, exacting. I have talked to you as thoughtful people, but I do not forget that the joyousness of youth is in you, laughter on your lips and the splendor of promise in your clear young eyes. Go to the great tasks with happiness, not in half despair. The victory is yours not for the asking but for the jubilant and yet earnest working. The best purpose is always a glad purpose; soldiers laugh as they go over the top; you will laugh as you go to the world's redemption, and may God be very good to you.

A final word, and that personal. It is two years since I left Houston. It is wonderful to be back.

STOCKTON AXSON


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